



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Alexandria's early public transportation

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Long before Metro expanded to Alexandria, way before we had vintage looking trolleys, Alexandria had a different version of public transportation. The early attempts to connect Alexandria to other parts of the Washington D.C. area through mass transit came in the 19th century – and required animal participation.

Horses were used by Alexandria's residents as early as 1749, when the city received its first charter. In 1864, The Alexandria City Railroad Company received a charter to lay tracks the length of King Street, over Duke, through West End, ending in Federal Hill.

Like some other famous transportation schemes, namely the Alexandria Canal, the company wasn't able to meet its promises and lost its charter. But the idea didn't die with the company. In 1872, the Virginia General Assembly approved the incorporation of the Alexandria Passenger Railway Company.

The plan was to start at Ferry Wharf at the foot of King Street, go up King Street to the corner of Fayette Street by the Virginia House hotel, and then run south on Peyton Street to the stone bridge which crossed Hoof's Run on Duke Street. Six cars were the entirety of the operation, which would be pulled by a single horse for most of the route, and by two horses over the incline between Lee and Fairfax streets.

Despite delays in the construction of the line, the operation was initially successful. The railway was inaugurated on June 12, 1873 and began regular service three days later. During a span of 48 hours during the railway's first week of operation, 1,224 passengers paid the nickel fare to ride the horse-drawn cars. This success was enough for the company to order a seventh car.

In the minds of northern Virginians, the railway signaled not only the advance of technology, but the possibility of suburban living. A writer for the Loudon Enterprise predicted that, "one of the good effects of (Alexandria's) street railway will be to crown the grace of heights west of the city with elegant private residences, where her business men can enjoy the pleasures of both town and country ..."

Despite its initial acclaim, the reversal in fortunes came quickly for the Alexandria Passenger Railway Company. Within two weeks, the first major accident claimed the life of a three-and-a half year old girl. Two months later, the trolley was involved in two incidents on the same day. One of those accidents also involved a child, although this time there were no fatalities.

City council tried to mitigate future safety issues by passing legislation in December that prohibited the idling of other vehicles "for a period longer than 5 minutes, so as to obstruct the passage of the cars of the ... Railroad."

Despite these measures, ridership decreased rapidly, and in July 1874, one year after the enterprise launched with such promise, the railway suspended its service. By the end of the month, potential buyers were visiting to inspect the equipment, expecting it to be sold at auction. While company directors tried to resurrect the operation in October 1874, the stockholders overwhelmingly voted to sell the cars and lease the route. One of their complaints was that the working and middle classes had ridden the cars, while the upper class "preferred ... paying shoemakers for leather to riding in the cars."

Several times, Alexandria residents tried unsuccessfully to revive the company, and three of the horsecars were sold to Richmond for their street railway by April 1875. The city began to tear up the rails



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

in September 1875. It would be 17 years before Alexandria allowed the next attempt at public transportation in its streets – the Alexandria, Washington, and Mount Vernon Electric Railway.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.